ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A25

WASHINGTON POST
25 September 1986

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A Spy For a Non-Spy Plus More?

Why not?

On May 20, 1978, the FBI arrested two Soviets working at the United Nations for espionage. Three weeks later, in the streets of Moscow, an American businessman was dragged from his car and thrown in a Soviet prison. This episode was reported on an inside page of The New York Times. Over the next year, the name of Francis Jay Crawford, the businessman, appeared in 68 articles in major American newspapers and magazines, according to Nexis, the computerized data base.

By comparison, as of Sept. 23, three weeks after the arrest of journalist Nicholas Daniloff, Daniloff's name had appeared in 433 articles, many of them on the front page. There have even been 17 articles referring to Crawford since Daniloff's arrest—not too many fewer than in the same period following his own arrest eight years ago.

In 1978, the spies and the businessman were released to their respective ambassadors. In an apparent deal, the businessman was tried and convicted of changing currency on the black market (although key prosecution witnesses got his hotel room wrong and claimed to have met him at a time when he was actually in the United States) and then was sent home. Shortly afterward, the two Soviet spies were exchanged for five dissidents and a pledge not to execute a captured American agent. There was not a peep of protest. Time called the deal "an upbeat note" in superpower relations.

It took the Reagan administration a little while to figure out that the Daniloff story was going to play differently because it involves a journalist. At first the administration expected the usual pressure not to let an "unfortunate incident" block the search for peace, the summit, etc. Instead, this one has turned out to be a freebie for hard-liners.

It seems that journalists, contrary to cliché, take a more principled view about dealing with the Soviets than the conservative business community does. In 1978, Jay Crawford's employer, International Harvester, answered charges that it was not doing enough to free its imprisoned executive with the indignant retort (according to Newsweek) that it had gone so far as "asking Sen. Charles Percy of Illinois to talk personally with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin." Wow, that's getting tough.

But what would be unprincipled about the deal that events seem to be drifting toward? That would be some variation of the Crawford model: their spy for our non-spy plus something else, such as a dissident or two. To evaluate that deal, you have to ask what we would have done with Zakharov if Daniloff never had been seized.

The answer is that we might well have expelled him with no quid pro quo at all. This is what we usually do with Soviet citizens caught spying in this country. Unlike most, Zakharov has no diplomatic immunity. That may be a violation of espionage etiquette, but is it a scandalous difference? A Soviet spying for the Soviet Union is not like an American spying for the Soviet Union. There's no reason we should want to send the hapless Zakharov—a low-level operative, in any event—up the river for life. In short, there's no doubt that, if it weren't for the Daniloff twist, the chance to win freedom for a brave dissident in exchange for a petty apparatchik like Zakharov would have been greeted by right-wingers as a triumph of hard-headed Reagan diplomacy. So how does it make us the losers if they throw in Daniloff as well? How does this make the dissident a mere "fig leaf"?

Suppose I were to grab George F. Will as a hostage and offer to trade him for a copy of Newsweek. If the editor of Newsweek persuades me to throw in $2 plus George F. Will, it's hard to see how I've been rewarded for my crime, or how I've been given any incentive to grab Jane Bryant Quinn in the future. If a Daniloff-plus-dissident deal is a "fig leaf" for anyone, it's a "fig leaf" for the Soviets. In practical terms, they will have gained nothing for their troubles. In the larger diplomatic game, the "winner" of such a trade depends on which side is perceived as the winner. In politics, this is known as "spin control."

It's ironic, therefore, that it's the hard-liners who are making it impossible for us to free an imprisoned American without being perceived as having suffered a humiliating defeat. This reverse spin control has already cast our side as the loser in the preliminary deal that got Daniloff and Zakharov released to the custody of their respective ambassadors. But why should this be perceived as a loss for us?

The denial of bail to Zakharov appears to have been an accident, a case of missed cues, in the first place. (This was also a repetition of the 1978 episode.) Why should Nick Daniloff have languished in a KGB prison to avoid our rectifying an error? With a bit of skill, stage two of the deal can be presented as a barely disguised backing down by the Soviet thugs. A patently phony show trial of Daniloff before releasing him would just compound their embarrassment. All it takes is a bit of positive spin control.